

The precarious and dangerous world of those who made the Lion Man was one of very low temperatures – in Europe, around 12°C lower than today – and long cold winters. If they survived in fancy, average life expectancy was probably little more than thirty years. In the short summers, there would be plants and berries to eat, but essentially they could survive only by hunting, using a range of stone tools to kill, strip and scrape their prey. They were dependent on animals for fat and meat to cook on their fires, and for furs and skins to provide clothing. Compared to these animals, humans were poorly provided with teeth or claws, were smaller than bears or mammoths, unable to run as fast as wolves, and no match at all for the greatest of all their predators, the lion. It can hardly be an accident that our sculpture combines the tusk of the largest animal they knew with the head of the fiercest – and the body of the only one capable of imaginative thought about the world they all inhabited.

The more closely you look at the Lion Man, the more it is clear that this is very far from being the result of an idle hour or two of whimsical whittling. The stance and posture of the figure suggest deep knowledge of ivory as a material – in particular the tusks of a young mammoth, from which the figure was made. Most of all, the precision of detail supposes highly developed technical skills, mastery of many different tools and a serious investment of time. As Jill Cook explains:

*You can see the curvature of the tusk along its whole length, cleverly used to give the impression of a figure leaning attentively forward. The sculptor also knew how to take advantage of the cavity in the centre of a tusk to achieve the broad, masculine separation of the legs, and how to exploit the close grain of the ivory to achieve the meticulous details of the head. The Lion Man can only have been made by an accomplished sculptor, who had already carved many pieces, and who knew the material inside out. It is an entirely original, technically very difficult, artistically brilliant*

The Lion Man, showing the curve of the mammoth tusk from which it was carved



*work, with a sense of power and spirit to it, which for me makes it a masterpiece.*

It was made using a number of different stone tools, and would have required a great deal of very close, demanding work. For example, trying to separate the arms from the body using a small stone saw would have taken many hours of repetitive action and intense focus. From experiments using similar tools we can calculate that it would have required at least 400 hours of work. And as Jill Cook says, it is quite obvious, from the level of skill deployed, that this cannot have been the first work of the sculptor who made it.

That last observation raises a key question. This was a small community, probably only a few dozen people, certainly not more than